

The other face of globalization COVID 19, Arbitrary Return of Bangladeshi Migrants and their Unpaid Dues

Key Messages

- Migrants bear the brunt of any crisis situation disproportionately more than the locals.
- Three-quarters of Bangladeshi migrants who returned after the outbreak of Covid 19 were sent back arbitrarily. Many had valid visa and work permit.
- Migrants on an average have lost remittance to the tune Taka 175,000.
- There is a need for creating a data base and a comprehensive documentation on grievances of returnee migrant workers.
- The recommendations of Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) 2016 should be implemented in dealing with migrants in emergency situations.
- Colombo Process countries should jointly pursue the issue of unpaid wages in different multilateral forums such as Abu Dhabi Dialogue and the Global Forum on Migration and Development.



Photo Courtesy: Dhaka Tribune

This policy brief is prepared for informing the global and national policy stakeholders in Bangladesh. It shares the findings of a qualitative research of RMMRU on Arbitrary Return of Bangladeshi Migrants and the Lost Remittance. The research findings were presented at the RMMRU eSymposium series titled Build Back Better: Covid 19 and Migration held on. 22 June 2020

Background

Since late 1990s researchers have demonstrated that integration of global labour market created scope for men and women living on the margins of society to benefit from globalisation through accessing employment in their own countries and overseas. At the same time scholars also recognized that a lot needs to be done in ensuring rights and protection of those who move within and beyond the borders of their countries for work. During any crisis situation vulnerability of the migrant work force, particularly those who are lowly skilled become more pronounced. Iraq-Kuwait War 1990, Financial Crisis 2008-9, outbreak of SARS 2003, Arab Spring 2010s are some examples. Covid 19 has again exposed the other face of globalization. Infection rate among the migrants are generally higher than locals. By 21 June 1106 Bangladeshi migrants have died contracting Covid 19 in nineteen countries. The other reality is discrimination in accessing health care services. RMMRU realises that it is very important to document the protection experiences of Bangladeshi migrants during the COVID 19 crisis.

My construction company was closed, I was living on my savings I desperately looked for work and found a casual work at a vegetable vendor near my camp

-Shaukat, 22, Qatar

I didn't have my usual work and was almost starving. I had to do some cleaning work and received iftaar. My family from Bangladesh sent me money and with that I cleared the rent

-Shajal, 38, Dubai

Methodology

RMMRU conducted in-depth interviews of 50 migrants over phone who have returned since the outbreak of Covid 19. It focuses on protection in the countries of destination. It attempts to understand the context of return during Covid 19 and explore the extent of lost remittances in the form of unpaid wages and benefits before return. A major limitation of the study is that it could interview only male migrants. More importantly, it is not representative of the total stock of returnees. The broader aim of the study has been to demonstrate to the policy makers about the need for documentation of the experiences of migrants who have been forced to return. It will provide an opportunity to develop emergency guidelines for protection of migrants during emergency situation.

My job did not fetch enough. I had a side business of vending cigarette. One of my customers ordered a few packets and I was waiting with that on a roadside. All of sudden police came and put me in a van. I tried my best to convince them that I had valid visa but they put me in jail anyway

-Mohan, 43, Qatar

Who are these migrants?

On an average the migrants are 36 years of age. They have returned from UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Malaysia and originate from 16 districts of Bangladesh. A majority are involved in lowly skilled jobs such as, vendors, shop keepers, restaurant waiters, car cleaners, cigarette stall owners or sellers, porters and informal Bkash agents. Those who work at cleaning companies and construction firms are usually categorized as formal sector employees, but majority of these workers are not recruited by the employers directly rather employed through supply companies. The employers have little direct dealings with the workers. Formal sector workers are very few; working in steel, plastic and chocolate factories. A few work as electrician and carpenter and may be considered as skilled workers.

Duration of detention

20
days on average

28
highest

11
lowest



Coping with Covid 19 in destination

Experience of coping with Covid 19 varied among these workers. Those who worked with companies in formal sectors, initially did not need to work; some were paid partially, at a later stage many worked half time and have been paid half the wages. A few of them experienced job loss. During the lockdown period at least half of those who worked in the cleaning sector continued working. They remained unpaid or partially paid. They were supposed to receive full payment after bills of the supplier companies were cleared by the authorities. A majority of those in so-called free visa did not have any work. Quite a few of them remained unfed for days and had to venture out disobeying lockdown rules to secure food.

Why returned?

Three-quarters (78%) of them were forced to return. All the returnees from UAE have been picked up from public places, detained for a while and later forcibly returned. In case of Kuwait it was done through announcing amnesty and an offer of free trip back to their countries of origin. People without work and food signed up for such deportation. One tenth (10%) returned voluntarily. 6% came on leave and in 6% cases employers sponsored the return of workers for safety reason (mostly from Malaysia).

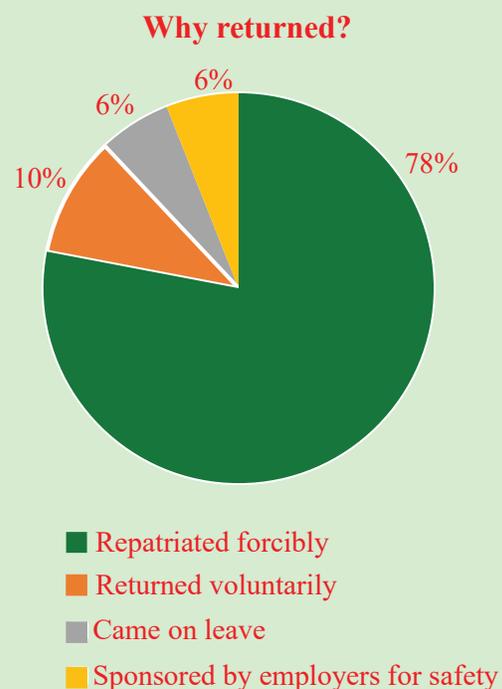
None of those, who have been arbitrarily sent back were in detention prior to Covid 19. They were picked up from stores or roads. This leads to the conclusion that they were arrested during Covid 19. It also implies that the claim by some of the countries of destination that personal safety of those in detention led them to repatriate these migrants does not appear to be valid.

Treatment in Jail

On average the interviewees were detained/jailed for 20 days. A section of them experienced good treatment in detention camps, the rest narrated stories of degrading treatment. Most of them were subjected to beating. Living in congested condition was a common experience. Some stated that 30 to 40 persons were kept in one room. Others mentioned 3 or more workers sharing a single bed. Inadequate and low quality food was provided. In UAE all had to stay in the same pair of clothes for the whole duration of their detention. Toilet and shower facilities were extremely inadequate. In Kuwait there was provision of only 2 toilets for 200 detainees. In one instance a diabetic person in UAE did not receive medication.

Return Journey

Except those who returned voluntarily and those who returned on leave, the rest described their return journey as traumatic. Migrants who returned from Kuwait mentioned that they could



Before being arrested I was told by my office to maintain cleanliness. But in jail I stayed in a pair of clothes for 28 days. While taking shower I wore a plastic bag. They had one rule for themselves and another for us

-Rashid, 38, Dubai

Police took 180 dirhams from my pocket. In the detention camp, we were under the open sky enduring scorching sun in day and shivering cold at night without a blanket. I was beaten by the security guards. Instead of coming to my rescue the employer handed over my passport to the police who then sent me back home

-Iqbal, 39, Abu Dhabi



bring their belongings. This is because once they registered under the amnesty they were asked by the authorities to secure an outpass from their embassy. Once they received the outpass they were taken to detention and from there they were taken to the airport. But others, particularly from the UAE, were picked up from roads and other places and taken into detention camps. They were taken to airport directly from the detention camps. They could not bring back any of their possessions (money and other goods) that remained in the camps/dormitories. A large number of them complained about long delay in Dhaka Airport once they returned. On the way home from the Dhaka airport a migrant was attacked by snatchers. He was senseless for a long time. He did not know how he put himself together and reached home.

Payment Due

26% of the returnees do not have any outstanding payment due. 74% left behind a significant amount of resource in destination countries. This can be considered as lost remittances. A substantial majority of the amount was unpaid wages, end of services benefits and other dues. In addition, cases were reported in which migrants lost money as they gave loans to friends from other countries, paid for the renewal of their visas and were subjected to theft by the law enforcers. On average the affected migrants lost Tk. 175,000 (minimum Tk.9,500 and maximum Tk. 5,00,000).

Recommendations for Bangladesh

A data base of those who are returning during to Covid 19 should be created immediately.

A comprehensive documentation on migrant workers grievances should be conducted.

Bangladesh missions in the destination countries need to start a registration process following due diligence before workers are repatriated. In case of unpaid wages and other benefits missions can take power of attorney from the migrants and pursue settlement of their claims.

A common guideline needs to be prepared by GoB for case by case evaluation of those whom the countries of destinations are forcibly returning. Important issues to check are, if visa had expired, and if all dues have been cleared

To follow up on the GoB's call to the OIC for ensuring 6 months wages to migrants it may consider mobilising other sending states to espouse such a position in different multilateral forums.

I had 22 months visa left. I was supposed to come home so I did lots of shopping in advance (mobile phone, clothes, toiletries, cosmetics). I could not bring anything back with me as I was deported

-Atiq, 55, UAE

It took 8 hours in Dhaka airport. I was very hungry. I heard others who came earlier got Tk. 5000 to get back home. But now the government has stopped that support.

-Monir, 44, Qatar

Lost remittance in (US\$)

2060

on average

112

minimum

5892

maximum

Resources left behind

74%

- pending wage
- end service benefits
- visa renewal fees
- loan to friends

26%

- no dues



Reflections of Key Speakers at the eSymposium on Arbitrary Return



We need to focus on preparation of a comprehensive database of those who returned during Covid 19.

– Shireen Akhter, MP



We should follow up on our demand to the OIC for payment of 6 months wages to those who have been repatriated even after having valid visa.

– Aroma Dutta, MP



The Ministry of EWOE through the labour wings will arrange recovery of unpaid wages of workers who emigrated legally if duly informed.

– Dr. Ahmed Munirus Saleheen,
Secretary, Ministry of EWOE,
GoB



Country of origin should raise the issue of unpaid wages, document the repatriation processes of migrants and seek the power of attorney to follow up the cases of returnees.

– William Gois,
Coordinator, Migrant Forum in
Asia.



The government officially recognizes the contribution of migrants to the national economy. Now it is time to help them to recover their unpaid wages.

- Shaheen Anam,
Executive Director MJF



Emphasis should be given to re-skilling of the returnee workers so that they can find employment at home or re-migrate, and also to provide loans to set up SMEs at home.

– Nazrul Islam, DG,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GoB



Instead of using resources from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund for returnee reintegration the government should allocate money from its budget.

- Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury
Noman, Secretary General,
BAIRA



There is no alternative but to take measures for those who are returnee migrants. Primarily we have selected 40 trades to train the returnee migrants.

- Dr. Md. Sakhawat Ali,
Director Training, BMET



The government should create a migrant centre for effective rehabilitation of returnee migrants.

– Syed Saiful Haque,
Chairman, WARBE.



Recommendations for multilateral and regional processes

1990 UN Migrant Worker Convention ensures protection of migrants in any emergency situation. The crisis situation reveals that the civil society organizations and countries of origin should do more for advocacy for its ratification.

Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) 2016 clearly assigns the responsibility of migrant population on countries of their employment irrespective of their immigration status. Its recommendations should be promoted in dealing with migrants in emergency situations.

Members of Colombo Process can jointly articulate the challenges of arbitrary return and suggest modality of transfer of unpaid wages. It needs to be placed before Abu Dhabi Dialogue as well.

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